

# Review of The Philosophy of John William Miller

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It is easy when one is "discovering" or "introducing" a thinker who, for whatever reasons, has been neglected, to do a little too much to effect a redemption. It is easy to work a little too hard to make one's case. *The Philosophy of John William Miller*, edited by Joseph P. Fell, happily avoids this sin. Although a number of the essays are written by former students or colleagues of Miller, there is nothing on the order of worship even where there is high praise. In this collection of eleven essays, the presentation of Miller's work is sober, measured, and critical. The result is an effective case for Miller's importance to the history of 20th century American philosophy.

The first two pieces provide the reader with an introduction to Miller and his work. They combine biography and philosophy in a way that exemplifies Miller's own interest in having philosophical thinking function in life. Indeed, this Emersonian-Deweyan strain is one of the central indicators of the "American-ness" of Miller's work. Fell's opening essay, "Miller: The Man and His Philosophy," places Miller's thinking against the background influences of Hegel, Royce, and W.E. Hocking. Moreover, Fell says of Miller that his "temper is Kantian, with some affinity to American pragmatism. . ." (24). This placement reveals two important features of Miller's philosophy. On the one hand, his thinking offers avenues of entry from a number of philosophical vantage points, but is comprehended by no one of these alone. On the other hand, it is a philosophy that sees philosophy as an original revising of an historic "inheritance." Thus, as we read Miller, whether for example as idealist or realist, we are forced to revise what the labels mean. In placing Miller's work, therefore, Fell reveals the difficulty of reading it. In the abstract this may seem trivial, but when one experiences Miller's writing, one can appreciate the importance of Fell's contribution. Miller's philosophical prose is at once riveting and imposingly dense; it intersperses and interweaves Emerson-like poetic passages with colloquial phrases and extended technical augmentation.

Following Fell, Robert Gahringer provides helpful keys to reading Miller in his essay "On Interpreting John William Miller." His central contention is that Miller ought not to be read as a traditional metaphysician providing a world order, but as a philosopher who seeks to facilitate the "constitutional revision" necessary to "maintain an orderly world and the self-control of finite selves" (37). While I am wary of leaning too heavily on such a distinction, I think the point is well taken. One must read Miller more as one reads Dewey than, say, as one reads Bradley or Spinoza. Gahringer's practical advice here parlays into philosophical advice since, for Miller, the writing is itself a part of the functioning of the thinking.

The second section of the book includes six treatments of Miller's philosophy. These essays together exemplify Fell's suggested claim that the angles of approach to Miller are many. Indeed,

many of the authors are attracted to Miller precisely because of the significance his work has for some interests they already have.

James Diefenbeck's opening piece, "Acts and Necessity in the Philosophy of John William Miller," is an extensive introduction both to the development of Miller's thought and to several of his central notions: functioning object, midworld, utterance, local control, and history. Diefenbeck, in effect, heeds Gahringer's advice and displays the constitutive and revisionary nature of Miller's use of these terms. For Miller, words in use, utterances, are themselves functioning objects; they are acts by which we establish a world in which we have some finite or local control. "History," for example, in Miller's hands, loses its sense of absoluteness and its cosmological flavor; it takes on a sense of finitude as a process of locally controlled acts. As Diefenbeck puts it: "History is the story of the consequences of our commitments and of the revisions of outlook which follow from . . . passionate allegiances to any particular concept of general order" (50). This essay gets Miller's terms and the history of his thinking on the table thus clearing the way for the investigations that follow.

In "The Fatality of Thought" Henry W. Johnstone, Jr. returns to the close connection between Miller's teaching and his thinking. As he puts it, "nothing was ever a mere pedagogical device for Miller" (67). Johnstone, a former colleague of Miller at Williams College, calls on his recollections of Miller's classroom lectures and course outlines to show Miller's Hegelian historicizing of W.E. Hocking's text, *Types of Philosophy*. For Miller, the history of philosophy is important, but not because it presents us with a definitive set of moves toward the absolute. Rather, the fatality of thought provides the clue to what philosophizing is; it is "to engage in revision that necessarily includes self-revision" (61). It is a method for moving from, through, and perhaps around alien ideas without the violence that arises from sheer confrontation. Johnstone reminds us not to mistake Miller's "fatality" for a series of deductively regulated philosophical argumentation: "The emergence of types of themselves was not occasioned by arguments. In Miller's scheme of things, philosophical arguments played a minor role: they were a sort of technical elaboration of a deeper process" (62). Thus, while maintaining a strong sense of Hegelian influence, Miller seems to lean in the direction of Dewey's account of philosophy's instrumentality to living. Teaching and philosophizing merge; a serious Socratic tone is announced. Johnstone captures all of this in a sentence that projects simultaneously a sense of respect and a note of caution. "Miller played for keeps; he offered not material but the opportunity for self-revision" (67).

In the next two contributions by Vincent Colapietro and Robert Corrington, Miller's work is assessed from vantages in the history of American philosophy. Colapietro approaches Miller by way of Peircean semiotics and Corrington by way of Royce and Dewey. Both are excellent essays though their importance lies in different directions. Colapietro seems to me to present a strong case for Miller's contemporary significance; Corrington, while acknowledging Miller's importance, raises some critical questions which future scholars of Miller's work will have to deal.

Colapietro opens up the broader implications of Miller's suggestion that utterances and other "human symbols" are functioning objects. On the one hand, Miller leads us in the direction of neopragmatism's focus on the centrality and the finite efficacy of language. On the other hand,

Colapietro points out, Miller wants to show "how truth can be in the act of telling without being at the whim of the teller" (76). Thus, Miller maintains the importance of history as a constitutional category—an importance that is missing in neo-pragmatism. It is the presence of history that provides ballast to acts and utterances: "The cultivation of an unflinchingly historical reason is, thus, required for the maintenance of a constitutionally authoritative present" (78). As Colapietro presents it, Miller's "semiotic" (Colapietro does warn that Miller would have been comfortable with much of what goes on currently under this rubric) turn eases us out of absolutism but into a realm where criticism remains possible because of the constitutional incompleteness of our worlds; unlike neo-pragmatism's turn, it does not impose an abandonment of criticism and therefore of control.

Corrington's essay, "Finite Idealism: The Midworld and Its History," places Miller somewhere between Royce (and Hegel) and Dewey. Miller, he says, "takes the claims and forces of history far more seriously than Dewey and sees the rise and spread of local control as part of the inner dynamism of history" (86). At the same time, as we have seen, Miller rejects the possibility of an absolute standpoint. While Corrington recognizes the strengths of this move, he suspects it involves difficulties that need attention. "There exists," he says, "a tension between the voluntarism of local control and the sovereignty of nature" (93). Corrington's concern is perhaps supported by Miller's account of nature in "Spectacle and Spectator." (See *The Midworld of Symbols and Functioning Objects* [New York: Norton and Co., 1982], 36-37.) Miller argues that "nature" is nothing but the environment constituted by local agents acting and uttering yet, it is remarkably difficult for us to peel away the notion of an environment as Peircean secondness in which such constitutional acts arise. It may be true that such a criticism is external to Miller's project, but the tension is unsettling. Corrington thus calls for "a larger metaphysical vista that will accommodate these insights without sacrificing the more basic and fundamental reality of nature" (93). The issues Corrington raises are ones that will need to be more fully addressed by future readers of Miller's work.

The final two essays of this middle section of the book address the ways in which Miller's writing expresses an ethical dimension. Stephen Tyman takes up the problem of evil to show Miller's place in the recent history of ethics. Gary Stahl, in "Making the Moral World," addresses the more general problem of valuation. Both authors point to Miller's similarities to and differences from Kant. In particular, both emphasize Miller's discussion of the acting of the self as constitutive of the possibility of value in history and finitude. These essays both reflect a Deweyan strain in Miller's outlook. For Tyman, "the mischance of evil lurks in the possibility that actions can be effected in such a way as to close off one's most vital opportunities by flying in the face of the actual, finite, life-giving circumstances" (106). For Stahl, "ends evolve within the process of will as it is affirmed in the institutions of the midworld" (120). The placing of Miller in contexts with which we are more familiar has, on the one hand, the effect of softening the rather radical nature of his discourse. On the other hand, it demonstrates the way in which philosophers bred in the late twentieth century—those who did not know Miller—will have to go about teasing out Miller's thought into manageable and readable orders. We may, as Gahringer suggests, pay some price for such an approach, but it is, it seems to me, necessary if Miller's work is to take its place in the constitution of twentieth century American thinking.

The final three papers of the book are of particular interest. Here, three students of Miller—George Brockway, Robert Elias, and Cushing Strout—describe how Miller's teaching, his philosophy, came to influence their own thinking. Brockway begins by using "money" to exemplify Miller's notion of a functioning object. Just as the yardstick functions to constitute space, money defines economics; in Miller's words, "Money announces the order of what is called trade" (127). Economics viewed as a static order of relationships is, by Miller's account, a misguided notion. As Brockway argues: "All standard forms of economics are overturned by this idea [that money is a functioning object]. . ." (126). No philosophical description of "functioning object" seems to me to do as much initial work as Brockway's exemplification. His down-to-earth descriptions of what Miller's version of "money" does to our idea of economics brings the reader quickly into Miller's way of thinking; they help shatter the density of some of Miller's own discussions of the functioning object.

Elias's essay, "Literature, History, and What Men Learn," takes Miller's notion of history through its practical paces. Using both U.S. history and modes of literacy criticism as examples, Elias argues that Miller's conception of "history" as a category of revision of human acts and purposes suggested to him the need to break apart some of the more entrenched categories of "discipline" under which contemporary historians and literary critics work. In telling the story—the narrative—of any "history" we must work broadly through a culture to write a shared story; we must, for example, read the literature not as a repositories of facts but as examples of ongoing revision of values and judgements. It is not merely what is said, but how it is said that counts. Viewed through the lens of Miller's teaching the disciplines of history and literature begin to dissolve as the acts of history and literature emerge.

The final essay in the book, Cushing Strout's "When the Truth Is in the Telling," is, whether by choice or chance, well placed. It is at once the most personal and the most disturbing essay. Strout tells the story of how he, working as he saw it under the influence of Miller, wrote several pieces on William James from a psychological angle, relying in part on the work of Erik Erikson. Miller's response to Strout's pieces was sufficiently negative to end their correspondence for some time. The proximate cause of the rift was Miller's thorough dislike for any psychological reductionism—a dislike that shows up at many turns in his published writings and which focused in particular on behaviorism. It tells us something of Miller's character and the seriousness he attached to his philosophy that this philosophical difference with Strout translated into a cessation of their relationship. Despite Strout's defense of his work, no full and honest conversation on the point occurred. In 1954 while visiting Europe Miller sent a postcard to Strout, concluding: "Wish we could talk." Strout's response is telling: ". . . I would echo his wish, anticipating the novelty and force of his ruminations, if the finitude he so respected and so richly made the center of his reflections had not made it impossible" (162). "Miller played for keeps," says Johnstone. And utterances are functioning objects.

Strout reminds us that philosophers, however good, are persons—a lesson he no doubt learned from Miller. It's a lesson often forgotten in our attempts to honor those who have influenced us deeply. It is not a negative ending to the telling of Miller's story; it's an ending that gives us a fuller measure of Miller, an ending that, rightly understood, should help those who begin to explore his writings.

The narrowness of our vision at any given time makes me hesitate to speak of Miller's work in any direction with too much conviction. As was the case with Peirce, much of Miller's thinking resides in a large collection of unedited manuscripts. These will no doubt disclose some weaknesses in the specifics of what we say now regarding Miller's philosophy. Nevertheless, given my acquaintance with Miller's published writings and the compelling nature of the essays in *The Philosophy of John William Miller*, I like Miller's chances in the fatality of thought.